Chapter 12

The State Coordinator's Role in Local Evaluations

This chapter identifies state leadership actions that can influence the quality of evaluations at the local level. It describes five goals for state coordinators:

- establishing and communicating state requirements and policies;
- providing information, training, and support to evaluators;
- training project staff in evaluation concepts;
- reviewing and offering feedback on evaluation plans and reports; and
- using the local evaluation results.

While the other chapters in this *Guide* are targeted to local evaluators and project directors, state-level leaders also create conditions for high quality and useful local evaluations. This chapter encourages state coordinators to review their options for improving local evaluation practice.

The ideas in the *Guide* are relevant to all states—even those with only a few Even Start projects. Some of the ideas may require that the Even Start state coordinator use state-level administrative or technical assistance funds to add the expertise of a state evaluator, such as a staff member skilled in evaluation or an outside contractor, to support local evaluation activities and conduct statewide activities such as summarizing results from local programs. State coordinators may suggest to local projects a single evaluator to conduct many local evaluations. (It is important to remember, however, that local evaluations need to have specific local relevance, including customized information for program improvement.)

A state's ability to implement some strategies may be influenced by the size of the state allocation. Some will need creative solutions such as joining with related state agencies or Even Start coordinators from other states to accomplish improvements. All states should consider acting on these five goals to support high quality local evaluations:

- 1. Establish and communicate state requirements and policies for local evaluations;
- 2. Provide information, training, and support to evaluators,
- 3. Provide training in evaluation concepts to project staff;
- 4. Review and provide feedback on evaluation plans and reports; and
- 5. Use the results of local evaluations.

Each goal is discussed below with examples from several states. There are many ways to address each goal, of course, and states will tailor actions to state circumstances.

Establishing and Communicating State Requirements and Policies

Strengthening local evaluation practice begins by clarifying expectations and communicating a vision of local evaluation to program directors and evaluators. Local evaluators and the project staff must know what is expected.

States may elect to formalize evaluation requirements through policies that govern how projects select evaluators and what evaluators are expected to do. For example, a state may govern evaluator qualifications, even providing a list of approved evaluators from which projects select. Or a state may define expected evaluation tasks and the level of compensation. It has become common for states to require evaluators to summarize and report data relevant to state performance indicators. Some states operationalize requirements in the form of report templates that guide data collection and reporting. State coordinators should ensure that projects spend enough resources on evaluation to do an effective job of collecting data for evaluation questions and analyzing outcomes to guide program improvements.

To clarify expectations, state coordinators can:

- define the expected roles of local evaluators in written policy, specifying the intended functions of local evaluation and the minimum expectations for all local evaluations;
- provide information about the range of costs typically required to meet the minimum expectations;
- provide general information about expected evaluator qualifications while not being overly prescriptive;
- allow evaluators flexibility to include evidence for questions that are important to the local context; and
- provide guidance for what information should be reported annually.

The focus of local evaluation should not be narrowed to collecting and reporting <u>only</u> performance indicator data. However, states should define the evaluator's expected role with performance indicators. They should state expectations for quality control associated with data collection for the performance indicators; analyses that go beyond simply summarizing and reporting information; meaningful comparisons of results of performance indicators with other data; and/or identifying recommendations emerging from the indicator results. Monitoring the degree to which local projects comply with legal requirements is not the evaluator's role.

Evaluation vs. Monitoring

Supporting local evaluation is different from monitoring local projects. State coordinators monitor the degree to which local projects comply with legal requirements, report on the state's performance indicators, and fulfill their approved objectives. In such monitoring, the state coordinator may use some of the same tools that evaluators use, e.g., a statewide database to track participant attendance, but the purpose of monitoring differs from that of local evaluation, which is to collect evidence to inform improvements in the local program.

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Example: Common Framework of Expectations

One state coordinator worked with a small group of experienced evaluators to develop a framework for local evaluations. The framework specified the evaluator's role in overseeing the summary and reporting of performance indicator data, designing and conducting an annual focused inquiry based on one or more research questions, and making recommendations for program improvement. The coordinator presented the framework to the state's Committee of Practitioners to be approved as Even Start policy, and the framework accompanied the request for new grant proposals and documentation required for continued funding.

Example: Targeted Training Opportunities

One state allots a special day for evaluators in each statewide training conference. Agendas are planned by an evaluation consultant working with local evaluators. Local evaluations are presented as cases, along with sessions on issues of interest, e.g., statewide results, selecting early childhood progress measures, ways to summarize data, importing data into spreadsheets, etc. As a result, evaluators have become colleagues and tap each other's expertise throughout the year.

Providing Information, Training, and Support to Evaluators

Evaluators usually want more information from states about Even Start operations, evaluation expectations, performance indicators, best program practices, and evaluation design options. They appreciate the opportunity to meet with fellow evaluators and learn how others approach data collection. Some states have an annual cycle of evaluator training.

State coordinators should consider the value of:

- providing at least one annual training opportunity for local evaluators;
- providing annual training in the state's required performance indicators and reporting system;
- encouraging evaluators to attend appropriate portions of statewide Even Start meetings (and encouraging projects to include time to do so in their agreements with evaluators);
- including evaluators on project listservs so they can keep up with changes in Even Start:
- offering orientations or mentorships for new evaluators to provide information such as that contained in this *Guide*; and
- presenting evaluators with information about statewide results for comparative purposes.

States cannot provide complete training in basic evaluation methods, but rather demonstrate the application of evaluation methods to Even Start circumstances. State coordinators should engage someone with evaluation expertise to help design and provide training. The person selected should have a neutral perspective and the respect of the state's professional evaluators.

Training Project Staff in Evaluation Concepts

Even Start project leaders may have no prior experience with hiring independent evaluators, developing an evaluation plan, or using the results of evaluations. Lack of knowledge may put them in an awkward position during hiring and may limit their abilities to ask for—and actually receive—what they need from an evaluator. State coordinators are best positioned to provide "consumer" information, but they need to do so before projects have engaged evaluators and evaluators have begun collecting data.

State coordinators should consider providing:

- information about evaluator qualifications in the request for proposals;
- information about evaluation expectations in orientations for new projects;
- this *Guide* or similar materials to all new projects;
- cost guidelines for evaluations;
- any applicable state procurement policies or hiring guidelines;
- sample evaluation agreements with local projects;
- model evaluation reports as well as criteria for determining the quality of evaluations;
 and
- clarifications about the differences between advocacy and evaluation for continuous improvement, and reinforcements of those distinctions at every opportunity.

It is as important to inform local projects about using evaluation findings and their responsibilities in seeking useful information as it is to address the technical aspects of hiring an evaluator. Hosting sessions that evaluators and project staff members attend together can help raise issues associated with working together, although it is also a good idea to allow each group to meet separately. State coordinators should work with projects to change evaluators when the evaluator is not generating useful information and support has been provided to him or her.

Reviewing and Offering Feedback on Evaluation Plans and Reports

State coordinators who read and react to evaluation reports in a timely manner demonstrate the importance of producing quality evaluation reports. The state coordinator's attitude about the value of evaluation will come through in the attention paid to evaluation results—an attitude that can influence the value that local projects place on evaluation. By paying attention to the findings reported by evaluators, state coordinators communicate how much they value the evaluator's independent perspective.

A state coordinator's reviews can have different purposes: looking for evidence of best practices to be shared with other projects; identifying project needs that can be addressed with additional resources or supports; identifying issues that require more information; and/ or identifying strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation approach. Feedback in any of those areas can reinforce the importance of solid local evaluations.

Of course, it may not be possible for the state coordinator to review all evaluation reports personally, but systems can be set up through which all written reports receive some attention and feedback.

Example: Getting Off to a Good Start

In one state, the request for new proposals includes the state's policy on local evaluation and a one-page description of what is expected of the local evaluation during the project's first year of operation. Projects can go to a website for information about Even Start, including examples of local evaluation reports, the state's performance indicator requirements, and last year's statewide indicator results. Numerous directories, including a directory of evaluators, are available online.

Example: Team Review of Reports

Local evaluators work with a team from the state agency to review local evaluation reports. Each report is reviewed by a team of two who follow a protocol for providing written feedback about the quality of the evaluation plan and execution. The teams can review and write feedback on three or four reports each day. One goal is to identify strong models that can be shared throughout the state.

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Example: Troubleshooting with All Parties

Based on this year's review of performance indicator data, the state coordinator is concerned about three projects from the standpoint of limited participation by families and disappointing results for families that are reported. The Stoneway Even Start project is one of the three.

The state coordinator has just received Stoneway's annual evaluation report which indicates, among other issues, that none of last year's recommendations were implemented due to staff turnover. On the bright side, the report also describes progress that adults are making on learning skills using a pilot curriculum with its own assessments.

The state coordinator calls
Stoneway's director and asks
for a meeting that includes the
project evaluator, leaders from
partner agencies, and lead
staff to discuss expectations
for the coming year.

The state coordinator might share the review of reports with colleagues in the state agency who work in cooperating programs such as adult education or with independent consultants. Peer reviewers—other local evaluators or project directors—can be ideal reviewers. Peer reviewers should use a structured process and ensure that confidentiality is respected and a spirit of improvement characterizes the review comments.

State coordinators should:

- establish the expectation of receiving an evaluation report from each project at least annually;
- find a way to give some feedback to project leaders and evaluators about all evaluation reports each year;
- consider that the primary function of evaluation reports is an analysis of information that the evaluator has collected for improving the local project;
- periodically share the strongest examples emerging from reviews;
- provide general feedback about the patterns observed in the reviews; and
- develop a strategy for working with evaluators whose work falls short of expectations.

Using the Local Evaluation Results

The state coordinator's use of local evaluation findings conveys the most powerful message about the utility of local evaluations. In some states, coordinators rely on local evaluation reports as the source of data about performance indicator results—automatically elevating the importance of the evaluator's role in contributing to Even Start's effectiveness. In others, state coordinators have found ways to weave the usefulness of local evaluations into a range of operations.

State coordinators should consider:

- including the evaluator in their on-site program visits and incorporating questions from the local evaluation in discussions with project staff about progress;
- acknowledging to the local project director and the evaluator the receipt and review of each year's report;
- including in their policies on local evaluation the expectation that after a project's initial year of operation, each evaluation report will include information about responses to recommendations made in previous years' evaluation reports;
- using the local evaluation as a source of information when determining which programs most need technical assistance;

- sponsoring sessions at state conferences about the results of particular evaluations that are relevant to many programs; and
- incorporating information from local evaluations in statewide reports.

These recommendations may require a change in culture in some states toward a more public and explicit use of local evaluation results to strengthen family literacy programs.

State coordinators who have already taken action in each goal area should share with other states their ideas for improvement strategies, including ways to fund activities. The ideas above may inspire ways to build on existing foundations.

For states that have few strategies in place, implementing ideas from several goal areas should speed the rate of visible improvements in evaluations and programs. Other state coordinators are an important resource and can augment the ideas presented in this chapter.

